

5 high schools named as 'Best Buy'



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Indiana high schools that excel academically and provide good value for state tax dollars were recognized Wednesday by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce with the release of the ninth edition of the Indiana's Best Buys report.



Jason Hemmerling, Westfield High School technology education teacher, instructs students in a Project Lead the Way class. WHS was one of five schools named to the 2007 Indiana Chamber of Commerce's Best Buys list. The Shamrocks have been included every since it began in 1999. Photo submitted

Included in the list from Hamilton County were Hamilton Heights, Hamilton Southeastern, Noblesville, Sheridan and Westfield high schools.

Since the program began in 1999, no less than four county schools have been included each year – with at least five since 2001.

"We're pleased. This marks the fourth time in five years we've won this award," said Sheridan High School principal Ed Baker. "It's good because it's an evaluation made by an independent based on criteria that's important."

HSE and Westfield have been named to the Best Buy list each year.

"That shows me consistency over time, not just at WHS but all the other schools," said Westfield Washington Schools Superintendent Mark Keen. "This is a recognition to all the teachers across the school corporation."

The only time all Hamilton County public high schools have been named on the list was in 2003.

2007 marks the first year Carmel High School has been left off of the list – this ties CHS with Noblesville High School with the second most in the county with eight.

"It's always good to be recognized for what you do and for the success of our students," said NHS principal Annetta Petty.

The study, which was presented by Indiana State University, examined 350 Indiana public high schools and, for the first time, charter schools with the appropriate available data. Using ISTEP+ pass rates, ISTEP+ Pass+ rates, graduation rates, SAT participation rates and average composite scores, and Advanced Placement (AP) passing scores, the Indiana Chamber developed a total school performance index for each school.

"The Indiana's Best Buys report is about celebrating excellence and encouraging improvement. Indiana high schools have the necessary resources to be among the best in the world. However, to be the best, everyone must work at continuously analyzing, reforming and/or maintaining quality instructional programs," said Indiana Chamber president Kevin Brinegar, who also serves on the Noblesville School Board. "Those schools on this list are doing just that, and their communities are reaping the benefits."

Getting the most with the funds allocated is a key for all Hamilton County school corporations.

"The bottom line is that in today's political landscape, all government entities need to be as financially responsible as they can be," said Baker. "This is an award that is a reflection on our superintendent and school board that we are. The community is getting the most for their money invested."

"We are very conservative on the demands we have on the community for support," Petty said.

This index, called the school's quality index, was then compared to each school's total expenditures per pupil to determine "best buy" schools and to each school's at-risk student/poverty rate, as measured by participation in the federal free/reduced lunch program.

"This is an indication for families that their spending money but there's value behind those dollars," said Keen. "You always want to be as efficient as possible. A lot of the time when problems arise the answer is to throw more money at it. More money can certainly help, but nobody has the amount of money they want. This means you have to be responsible and as effective with what you have."

For 2007, 136 public high schools were designated as a "best buy" for giving taxpayers the most value for their money. Two methods determined this honor. A school was named a best buy if it had a quality index above the state median and expenditures below the statewide median of \$10,196 per student. The second method was by having a quality index

ranking that was 20 percent higher than the school's expenditures ranking.

All data used in the Best Buys report was collected from Indiana Department of Education databases. This year, the Indiana Chamber modified how it compared educational costs among schools. Capital projects and debt service funds were examined, along with the money received from the state's General Fund, to comprise a school's total expenditures per student. Previous Best Buy reports included General Fund revenues only.

"This adjustment was needed to provide an even more accurate picture of how wisely, or unwisely, tax dollars are being spent. We've been seeing an increase in use of these capital projects and debt service funds for standard operating costs – for such things as utilities or loans – and wanted to acknowledge that trend," said Brinegar. "Furthermore, with the widespread impact of high property tax bills on many Hoosiers, and acknowledging that local schools are a significant benefactor of that revenue, we felt it only appropriate to take a stricter look at school spending."

This latest edition of Indiana's Best Buys also includes a broader range of school performance data and a greater emphasis on high school graduation rates for the calculation of each school's quality index. The addition of AP measures and ISTEP+ Pass+ rates is an attempt to give schools additional recognition for their attention to higher performing students. The additional weight on graduation rates reflects a growing confidence in those rates as the result of recent legislative changes.

Know More

In its ninth year, the Indiana Chamber of Commerce's Best Buys report lists Indiana high schools that are excelling by offering the highest levels of academic achievement for the lowest amount of tax dollars. Included in this year's list were five secondary schools in Hamilton County with previous years named as a Best Buy school in parenthesis.

Hamilton Heights High School ('99, '01, '02, '03 and '04)

Hamilton Southeastern High School (every year from '99 to '07)

Noblesville High School (every year from '00 to '07)

Sheridan High School ('03, '05 and '06)

Westfield High School (every year from '99 to '07)

To view the report and learn which other high schools are among Indiana's Best Buys, visit www.indianachamber.com/bestbuys.

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